

The University of Chicago

THE PLACE OF THE ECSTATIC
TRANCE IN THE IDEAL OF
THE GOOD LIFE

A PART OF A DISSERTATION SUBMITTED TO
THE GRADUATE FACULTY IN CANDIDACY FOR
THE DEGREE OF DOCTOR OF PHILOSOPHY

DEPARTMENT OF COMPARATIVE RELIGION

1930

By
PAUL GUERRANT MORRISON

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TYPES OF TRANCE STATES

There are many states of existence which are regarded as normal although they differ widely among themselves. In the ordinary waking state the individual is aware of what is going on around him, though he may not pay particular attention to any part of it. He may be letting his mind wander from thought to thought without any attempt at control. Again, he may pay close attention to some object outside him, or to some problem which demands his effort. He may be asleep and yet be normal. He may be in the drowsy condition which precedes sleep. He may be evincing agitation, more or less profound. In all these the individual is regarded as normal. The criteria of normality appear to be, consequently, the ability to respond to external stimuli in a rational manner, the ability to pursue a line of purposive action leading to a recognized goal, the ability to react to changes of circumstances in a way approved by other persons, and a fairly thorough orientation in space and time.

Abnormal states lack one or all of these abilities. Trance states are characterized primarily by a more or less complete imperviousness to external stimuli. The normal condition of absentmindedness, the brown study, concentration of attention upon some problem, all resemble trance in that to a slight degree they involve neglect of outside stimuli. In these minor types of abstraction the neglect is generally of

slight duration and applies to a limited range of stimuli. Pain and intense visual or auditory stimuli break up the preoccupation and cause the subject to take up again the problems of adaptation to external conditions. But the depth of trance is roughly measurable by the intensity of the stimulation required to interrupt it; the depth ranging from light trances to the most profound. In the latter no stimulus is able to break the spell, we can only wait until the person "comes to" of himself.

There is little agreement as to the classification of trance states. Into this category are thrown such varied things as ordinary dreaming, sleep-walking, the deeper stages of hypnosis, extreme cases of melancholic lethargy, exceptionally protracted cases of sleep, epileptic seizures, anergic stupor, hysteria and the state into which many mediums of spiritualistic seances fall. All of these are characterized by a more or less pronounced neglect of external stimuli. None of the list may be identified with the ecstatic trance, if we are to approach an understanding of it at all. Nothing is gained by classing ordinary dreams and the ecstatic trance together, because many persons dream while few attain ecstasy. Many persons walk in their sleep who are in no other way different from most of us. Of the remaining states we may next eliminate the ones known to be the result of diseased conditions, either functional or organic, viz. melancholic lethargy, anergic stupor, epileptic seizures and hysteria. Of the causation of exceptionally protracted cases of sleep we can know little until

normal sleep is better understood. There remain the deeper stages of hypnosis and the trance of mediumship.

The hypnotic trance differs in two ways from the ecstatic. It is induced by another person, and it is ordinarily forgotten upon awaking. Further, it is seldom taken by the subject to have been a supernatural state. As we have seen, it appears distinctly to be a mark of the ecstatic trance that its subjects have taken it to be a supernatural state, interpreted as each one understands the supernatural from his cultural heritage.

It may be urged that the ecstatic trance is produced by auto-hypnotism or auto-suggestion. Here one should proceed carefully, taking care to understand what his terms mean, if he is to arrive at sound conclusions. Hypnotism is generally the production of an artificial sleep by the suggestion of an operator who usurps the attention of the subject. In ordinary life the word "suggestion" is used in another sense to imply any thought or idea presented to a person. It differs from hypnotic suggestion in that the recipient is left at full liberty to criticize it as he is able and perhaps to refuse to accept it. The hypnotic suggestion is intended to produce, release or facilitate motor attitudes, without permitting the recipient the use of his critical abilities.¹ The notion of

1. Cf. F. H. Allport, *Social Psychology*, p. 251 f.

auto-suggestion, in the sense of a suggestion that produces hypnosis, implies that a person gives himself a thought which is to lead immediately to action without criticism. As such it is difficult to distinguish from any usual fiat, or act of will which leads to immediate action which is not hypnotic. At all events, it throws little light upon how a person achieves a hypnotic state in the absence of an operator. If this be a true explanation of the matter, it opens up a problem instead of constituting an explanation.

The assertion that the mystic trance is brought about by auto-hypnosis is sometimes meant to imply that the trance therefore is an instance of self-delusion and falsehood. But in this connection our ordinary terminology is likely to become involved. What is one to understand by the word "false" as applied to the ecstatic trance? Not that it really does not happen, for that is too well attested historically. Does it mean that the content, that which the mystic sees and hears is false? This content does vary from mystic to mystic, and their contradictory versions cannot all be true, certainly. Does the criticism mean that the mystic does not, therefore, see and hear anything? But the mystic reports what he feels to be a certainty and even of ordinary things our certainty is always a feeling. "If the feeling of certainty is eliminated, the word 'certainty' becomes unmeaning."¹ The subject has the same evidence for his experience in the trance that he has for any other subjective

1. F. C. S. Schiller, *Studies in Humanism*, p. 84.

experience. The fact that no one else has the experience but he is no reason for saying that he does not have it, for one cannot rule out even a headache on this ground. Does the word "false" mean that there are no objective correlates for the items of his experience? It is just here that our ordinary tests of truth fail, because the mystics have, as a rule, claimed that what they experience is supersensual, and cannot be expected to have correlates in the sensory world. This claim is of course the statement of complete subjectivity, with which objective tests are powerless to deal. If a man says, "I thought so and so, upon coming out of anesthesia", how are we to check his statement objectively? Sometimes the criticism is intended to imply that because the trance is self-induced it is worthless. But the mystics have never made a secret of the fact that each aspirant must make his own preparation and walk his path alone. Self-induction is the essence of Yoga. Again it is urged that since minor states of abstraction can be induced by auto-suggestion that therefore this trance is but a minor state. This argument needs only to be clearly formulated, for then it is seen to be obviously untrue.

It may appear that the preliminary technique of the ecstatic trance has many resemblances to the technique of self-hypnotism, and that consequently the two may be identified. But this identification is seldom entirely convincing, for two reasons: it cannot be maintained that the two techniques show a point to point resemblance; and secondly, the

identification is valid only when it is said that the ecstatic trance is produced by a "kind of hypnosis". One always feels that this particular kind is so different from the other kinds that little is gained by classing them together. The differences are more significant than the resemblances. Then there is always the objection that so many more persons are capable of auto-hypnosis than are capable of ecstasy that it is highly probable that the two are not identical.

In the mediumistic trance the symptoms resemble a deep sleep much more than do those of the ecstatic trance. The medium generally retains no memory of what happened during the trance, after ordinary consciousness is restored. The entranced medium speaks or writes during the trance, and the parts of the body not used in these activities present all the usual signs of sleep. None of these features are characteristic of the ecstatic trance.¹

There are also a number of states produced by drugs, e.g. alcohol, hasheesh, peyotl, opium, nitrous oxid and ether, which resemble trance states in that the subject is cut off from the outer world and has private experiences. These are distinguished most clearly from the ecstatic state in that they are produced by drugs while it is not, and that almost any person can experience the aberrations which drugs produce who will take the drug.

1. Cf. Encyc. Britt. 14th ed. 22:403.

In summary, there are two characteristic marks which identify trance states of all kinds. The first, imperviousness to external stimulation, distinguishes trance from ordinary consciousness, but not from sleep and unconsciousness. The second, mental preoccupation of some kind, evidenced by the expression of the subject's features, his attitude and movements, or by an account of his experiences given after the trance, distinguish it from sleep, coma, and death. The various trance states are distinguished from one another somewhat in the manner just indicated.

The external marks of the ecstatic trance are reported with remarkable uniformity by a diversity of observers. The entranced person remains motionless in whatever position he is found when the state comes on; his eyes remain open; his face reflects an apparent interior joy. In the deeper stages the pulse rate and breathing are slowed down; the muscles become rigid, and the body grows cold. One observer¹ reports of the most advanced stage that the eyes assume a glassy appearance, the sphincter muscles are relaxed and there is a partial gangrene which gives off a corpse-like odor. Anesthesia and analgesia deepen progressively with the increasing depth of the trance.

It is evident from this clinical picture that the external characteristics of ecstasy bear many resemblances to those of the other trance states which have just been reviewed.

1. Mayo, in Desages, L'Extase, p. 9

The external features, indeed, are not sufficient to set the ecstatic trance in a class by itself. Its distinguishing features are to be found in two other directions: the preliminary technique and the subjective content.

The preliminary technique as it is found among many races and religions widely scattered in space and time, is yet easily identifiable by one who is familiar with it in any one instance. In most cases fasting is prescribed, a vegetarian diet is favored, sexual abstinence is enjoined and also detachment from the everyday affairs of the world. More important than these is the systematic training in concentration. The aspirant must practice over long periods the keeping of his mind upon a limited cycle of ideas and images. This concentration is aided at the beginning by the use of spoken words, prayers, chants or some liturgical formula. As his proficiency increases, spoken words are abandoned and the aspirant continues his meditation internally. In time he acquires the ability to shut out the external world at will, giving his entire attention to the single idea which calls out his efforts.

From time to time, not invariably by any means, this preparation is rewarded with ecstasy. The devotee reaches the goal, the reward for which he has so faithfully and laboriously striven. What is this goal? How is he rewarded who has turned away from the life of ordinary humanity, forfeiting all its joys? The literature of mysticism is rich in answers. The fact that the mystics have believed that in the ecstasy they have held

communion, nay, even experienced union, with God, should give us an idea of the valuation that has been placed upon ecstasy, regardless of our own theological position. The experience is remembered as the apex of human life upon earth by those who have had it, and their interpretations, reflecting whatever accidents of doctrine and training each devotee has been subjected to, yet agree on the one point, -- that they have found a profound peace and a superlative exaltation. This valuation, it should be remembered, is what has given to ordinary folk the term ecstasy which is used to express any overmastering joy.

EVALUATION OF THE ECSTATIC TRANCE FROM THE MODERN STANDPOINT.

Studies of personality bring to light a bewildering variety of men and minds, so great a variety that one may well despair of comprehending them all under any system of classification. Not only are the aims of men different, but also the things which each holds to be valuable, most worth while. But most varied and elusive of all is the personal quality of each. It is possible to grade men more or less exactly on the basis of what may be called their "interiority". The concept eludes exact definition. But there are persons who are concerned primarily with themselves, their own relations to others, their conflicts and problems, their destiny and importance. They are not always well adapted to other persons in whose society they find themselves. At the other end of the scale we find those who are pre-eminently gregarious, even indiscriminately so. They find in solitude only ennui, restlessness and misery, and therefore prefer never to be alone.

The drift of current educational philosophy and practice is to regard the latter type as normal, and the former as morbid. If one assumes that nothing of real value is found in solitude, outside the social group, then he can magnify the inadequate adjustment of the former type, seeing its shyness as morbid, its thoughtfulness as brooding, and emphasize the fact which is often too apparent, of his sense of inferiority. When all human value is placed upon cooperation, upon being a good mixer, a good talker, a sociable person, it is not surprising that those who do not meet these standards appear at a

disadvantage which is almost pathologic. Were the official philosophy the reverse of what it is, as in some societies it has been, our latter type would then appear at a like disadvantage. If we took a person who fits with ease into society, enjoys the bustle and noise of crowds, speaks easily and fluently and delights in conversation and publicity, and set him in a society where these things were considered trivial and morbid, forcing him to be a solitary -- undoubtedly he would be ill-adapted and would presently develop a feeling of inferiority.

There are these two types of personality. The distinction, it must be said, is not one of difference in kind so much as of difference in degree, since perhaps no person is nowadays without tendencies to solitude or to company. Nevertheless, it is true that some persons are prevailing interior in their interests and habits, and others are prevailing exterior. The distinction is, of course, not the old one of selfishness and unselfishness. The interior-minded may be painfully self-denying and the exterior-minded callously selfish and thoughtless.

Now it seems to be a well attested fact that in the evolutionary process consciousness precedes self-consciousness, awareness of the environment coming into existence before the awareness of one's self as something within the environment. Even among human beings we find those of low mental level concerning themselves almost wholly with external things. Ethnologists find among primitive peoples no well developed sense of personality, in groups that have reached a fairly adequate

adjustment to their surroundings. These facts apparently indicate that the type of person who concerns himself chiefly with external things is the simpler and coarser structurally.

With the development of culture we find more and more definite notions of personality and of its value. The worth of the individual person seems to have emerged first in the institutions of royalty and nobility; only the leaders and chieftains being important in this world and worthy of immortality in the next. The growth of the democratic ideal is the extension of this conception of worth to all human beings. But a democracy of aristocratic persons -- a community, that is to say, of personalities who have realized or may realize the loftiest potentialities of which humanity is capable -- is an ideal that is in constant danger of shipwreck from contact with the insidious counterfeit doctrine that all persons are equally valuable because the greatest is no better than the least. This counterfeit of democracy is greatly aided by the modern social philosophy, for in this philosophy values derive from social activities and preoccupation with external, environmental concerns. It favors the gregarious person and refuses to recognize the solitary. Its canons of normality and worth are entirely in terms of adaptation to the group.

A sound philosophy of life cannot deal exclusively with a man's social interests, any more than it can omit consideration of them altogether, because it must include both the social and the personal. The ideal personality achieves a balance be-

tween personal and social interests, and the ideal human world is one which has room for extreme types to live without mutual distrust and disparagement. But the balance cannot be a static one; in our changeful world it must be understood as a balance continually arrived at and continually disrupted. Great personalities owe their greatness to the depth of their interiority, to resources found within themselves for obtaining the fruits of solitude, and to the constant efforts which they make to maintain a balance. Take the figure of a tree, for illustration. The more deeply its roots penetrate the earth, the higher it is able to rise. But if it merely bury itself in the earth, it never rises at all; and if it spend all its forces above the ground it will perish for lack of roots.

Now aside from figures of speech, what is meant by profundity of interiorization? It is not sufficient that a man be constantly preoccupied with himself, for then the conceited, the hypochondriac and the insane would be profound. In the first place, an extensive knowledge of men and things is required, though this knowledge is no guaranty of profundity. It may make of him but an erudite pedant. He may run entirely to boughs and leaves. It must be attended by a growing comprehension of the nature of the self, the thing which each of us is. Light from the four quarters of the earth must be brought to a focus within him, to effect a more profound interiorization.

When this is accomplished, what do we find? In view of the unique nature of each individual it is evident that the

answer to this question would for each of us be unique. One person could not describe it for another. But each may recognize, according to his own development, the degree of success which another has reached, within limits. In the next place, whither does this process of interiorization lead and what is its term, if any? This question, too, has to remain unanswered to a large extent. We are able to get clues and intimations from other persons, but they are of no absolute value, of no value at all until we have interpreted them by our own experience. Allowance must always be made for the symbols, for the language which a person uses in describing his experience. It is to be expected that the description will be cast in terms drawn from the social heritage which furnishes the individual with the tools he uses. But when the symbols are interpreted in our terms, we may reasonably conclude that he has had the same experience as we, up to a certain point, and beyond that his language is obscure to us because we have not gone that far and therefore do not know what he is talking about.

Yet, if we assume that there are radical differences of depth in interiority in different persons, as we have for the moment done, it appears reasonable to hold that we can understand a description of inner experiences to the level which corresponds to our own, and that when a fellow man's descriptions of further stages become incoherent and incomprehensible to us, he is nevertheless describing definitive experiences, but experiences for which we simply have no parallel and no standard of reference. On the face of it, if there be radical

differences of depth (or height, the figure of speech matters little) of conscious experience actually obtainable by humanity, this inability to comprehend beyond one's own level is just what one should expect.

It is quite possible, then, that in what we who are ignorant of it call by the general term "ecstasy", there are various degrees of intensity of consciousness and intensity of bliss obtainable, and quite reasonable that one should be able to understand the verbal description of another person's experience of it only so far as he himself has penetrated. Moreover, should we grant for the time being that these are real or veridic stages, we need not be so impatient of systems of philosophy and religion built up by those who have had the experiences. We need only to check the systems in order to discount what we can plainly perceive to be erroneous in the light of ordinary experience, always bearing in mind that we may be taking literally what the author intended to be symbolic and metaphoric.

On the levels of everyday experience we find differences in personal quality so great as to constitute different levels of consciousness, from the dull mind which moves lethargically through a circumscribed routine of ideas in the person concerned with animal satisfactions alone, to various sorts of individuals who have wider interests, more nervous rapier-like wits that seek change and novelty without ceasing. Some persons are satisfied with a range of ideas and satisfactions which drive others into neuroses when they are forced to limit themselves to

it. We find persons with a capacity for profound wonder and intense reverence, to whom the world appears as a hierarchy of awe-inspiring mysteries; and others who apparently reverence nothing, to whom the world appears rather as a flat picture, however gorgeous a pageant it may be at times -- flat as a painting on canvas. There are, as we have seen, some who find in companionship, in contact with people, their sense of reality and satisfaction, and others who are devoted to the arts which "consume the personality in solitude". There seem to be persons to whom religion means scrupulous self-examination and extreme tenderness of conscience, and others to whom religion means the maintenance of institutions, the observance of public performances and duties, to whom "personal religion" means the avoidance of scandal and the practice of amiability.

It may be maintained by an analytical critic that these are all merely instances of habit systems upon one and the same level of human consciousness, in fact that is what the conception of human personality as a congeries of reaction patterns would predispose one to conceive. By this conception it is idle to talk of levels of consciousness, when all we have is a flowing, a linear progression from one pattern to another intime. It should be remembered that this concept of reaction patterns, as well as that of levels of consciousness, is but a technique for helping the human mind to understand itself, and that this need of comprehension is more important than adherence to any method of conceiving ourselves, however orthodox a given ideology may be. If the emotions give us a sense of depth and spacious-

ness, of exaltation and profundity, furnishing a three-dimensional theatre wherein the flow of ideas follows its linear progression, but against a background of varying degrees of depth and intensity -- this must be taken into account. If the experience of ecstasy furnishes its subjects with a sense of profundity and intensity, so keen as to seem discontinuous with ordinary consciousness -- this must also be taken into account. If a current method of interpreting the human mind to itself has no place for these things, it must evidently be modified before it can be of real service to us.

If we lay aside for the time all ready-made methods of regarding the human being, and attempt for a while to see him with an Adamic freshness, we see, through all the accidents of human life, the drive for pleasure at the bottom of human nature. Without raising the much debated problems of hedonism, and granting freely that the desire is not for an abstract pleasure consciously conceived, we may yet feel certain that when the proposition is stated that humanity yearns for happiness, we have reached a fundamental fact. More than that, we have evidence in the behavior of all organisms that they turn toward whatever continues and enhances life and shun its opposite. In human society this primitive desire is somewhat obscured because it is modified by the exigencies of others, and is overlaid with codes and techniques hallowed by millennia of human experience, so heavy a deposit in fact, that because of it men often lose sight of the truism that these things are means to an end, and preoccupy entire lifetimes in devotion to

means that never really achieve the intended goal. The codes, the techniques, become ends in themselves, things to be observed and preserved, even when their purpose has been forgotten, even when they actually stand immovably in the way of human happiness.

Once we get firmly in mind this drive of desire and try to discover its underlying mechanisms, we find ourselves rather baffled and helpless. We may reduce desire to a felt need or lack, which is a conscious tension resulting from a physiological disequilibrium. Then follows restlessness and the search for whatever will satisfy the need and restore the lost equilibrium. Each individual must learn to sustain the bodily tensions which create desires until such time as he is able to reach a socially sanctioned release. Not only are the modes of release made to conform to a cultural pattern by the group, but even the interpretation of the desire is given to each person by his cultural milieu. Each is taught to name his organic strivings and disturbances; he is taught when and to what extent they may be satisfied; he is taught the place of each in the scale of emotionally charged opinions and attitudes; and so the individual is civilized and socialized. But that this process of socialization is a laborious one, almost any mother or primary teacher will testify. The acquisition of approved habits, the maintenance of the complex code, the constant repressions and inhibitions which the individual must practise, all tend to produce in him a condition of chronic strain, a strain which is not materially alleviated by the relatively scanty relaxations which society permits.

Habit and routine, so necessary to the stability of society, inevitably produce a deadening effect upon the individual, and tend to maintain his conscious life on a level of dullness. The fresh curiosity, the keenness of perception of his childhood are dulled not only by advancing age, but also by the implicit commands of the social group. All of us fall victims of this intolerable staleness. Yet among many there persons there persists a rebellion, a tormented yearning for something to lift us out of this dead level, to restore to us the keenness and freshness of childhood. For there is a glamor about certain rare moments in childhood and youth wherein the innermost self stands in its innocence before the eternal secret, suffused with its light but not comprehending the light which streams upon him. These moments set before us an ideal of illumination towards which we strive through all our later life, more or less blindly.

In one way or another men and women are constantly seeking for repetitions of such moments, striving to bring there- to the comprehension of a mind trained in commerce with the senses, skilled in evaluating judgment over a period of years. The roads to this end are many, the aspirants countless. The thrill is sought in drugs, in meditation, in the obscure but real gratifications of fellowship and of power, in the love of the sexes and in the emotional gamut of religion. Even in periods of rest and recuperation, in the doldrums of fatigue and monotony, the ideal still holds out to us its lure; it gives purpose and solidity and a vital quality to life, unique for

each individual. In drugs and danger, in love and religion, one seeks the stimulant that is to lift him out of himself to the contemplation of "the light that never was on sea or land", to the keen enjoyment of a superlative, though unstable peace, certitude and bliss.

In its long march from savagery, human society has embodied in its corporate memory the knowledge that some of these "means of grace" are unsocial and treacherous. As the group intelligence becomes more certainly enlightened, some of the ways hitherto open are rigidly closed, and before their portals stand its guardians with the two-edged sword of the law. One door that seems to be closing to all but the most indomitable is that of drugs. The portal of extreme sensuality has been so long guarded that many children of civilization do not so much as suspect its existence. We are even beginning to frown upon the more fanatical modes of religious devotion.

There is, of course, a certain blindness in the zeal of society for its own self-preservation. We are urged to be sane, and socially-minded and balanced, regardless of the stubborn fact that enthusiasm and excess are the only things that can lift us out of the routine dullness of the shallow commonplace into any measure of zestful living.

He who has been in peril of his life and has escaped knows the strange quickening, the abnormal clearness of mind that endures long enough to enable him to effect his escape, although it is soon clouded over by the trembling and excitement

of the emotion called fear. Then, if an audience was present, he can remember the foolish going over and over the incident, "talking it out", until the organic storm subsided and calm re-descended upon the viscera. The surprising feature remains ever the astonishing clearness of mind, which seems so pleasant a heightening of normal consciousness. For this thrill, many persons court danger, not in so great measure as to imperil life though everything else is ventured.

It stirs the fever that gamblers know; it accounts for the popularity of dangerous sports; and in many unnoticed ways, glimpses of the bright face of danger add interest to ordinary life. Still, in these milder forms the stir is slight; we are scarcely roused from our drowsy mortality, and so the stimulant fails of its high purpose. Moreover, the constant trend of progress is toward increasing safety and increasing comfort which tend to leave the sleepers in undisturbed repose by removing from the sometime hostile environment all the stings of "that life which cutteth into life".

Many turn to crime for the thrill, and many more to alcohol, to find in these a perverse and strong delight, denying the obligations of that society which dooms them to stolid mediocrity. The joy of the criminal is hedged about with the weariness of continual vigilance and the fear of ambush or treachery; it is heavily priced, so that few can meet its terms. For alcohol, on the contrary, the path was easier. Hastening from mild titillation of the senses into real intoxication, one

experienced moments of detachment of the mind from the body, whose harbingers were the sensations of floating and whirling with an exquisite dizziness, followed too soon, in any case, by nausea and stupidity and sleep. Brief in like manner are the moments of exaltation obtained through music, through religious orgies and the sacral ecstasy, and followed also by exhaustion and profound lassitude.

We gather that these moments of ecstasy -- standing outside the body -- are strictly limited by the body itself, moments bought at the price of nervous strain and followed by exhaustion. Moreover, we are cursed by the law called by the economists the law of diminishing returns, i.e. the more often a given stimulant is used, the less profound is its effect, until at last it is powerless. It is most noticeable in drugs, but it is true of any other stimulations, no matter in what high esteem they may be held.

The resources for the heightening of consciousness by the mystic ecstasy have been assembled by the leading mystics into a coherent technique. Although the Christian mystics decried pure technique, yet the technique was perfected. Such monuments along the road as St. Ignatius of Loyola's "Spiritual Exercises" and the "Yoga Sutras" of Patanjali are eloquent witnesses to the efforts of man to arouse "the unaccustomed part of himself" by a systematic regime of prayer, fasting, mortification and meditation.

That such systems have fallen into decay is not the

fault of the system as much as it is of their abandonment by an industrial era, these projects dream of obtaining the noblest human values by manipulation of the environment. This orientation of human endeavor seems directed by the belief that happiness presupposes physical comfort and economic security. That wealth has its thrills is unquestionable. The senses may be gratified with rare fabrics, choice foods, and in general with luxuries hitherto unknown and non-existent. More than that, there is a wide range of fascinating feelings to be enjoyed in social ascendancy, in climbing from one social level to another, in a widening traffic with many kinds of persons. The game itself, of amassing a fortune, is reputed to have its peculiar charm, strong enough, we are told, to activate a devotee were most of the rewards of wealth foregone.

If from the present point of view the modern orientation has any fault, it is its tendency to emphasize safety and comfort, to build up an elaborate ministry of the body which allows no excess for fear of disturbing its health and balance. But we find also among the orthodox mystics the growth of suspicion and even fear, of excess. These gifted persons came eventually to distrust the very experiences which at first led them on with zealous haste. They came to moralize over them, to warn their successors not to overvalue such abnormal states. Whether his face be turned to this world or the next, man seems to fear that which he also desires. He would like to obtain pleasure without the attendant pain. He would like most of all to "burn always with the Lord, gem-like flame" of which Walter

Pater speaks, without suffering the depression and "dryness of soul" which such a drain upon his nervous energies entails.

There is surely a blindness, or at least a short-sightedness here. If lassitude and exhaustion be the price set in nature for moments of exaltation, should not one face the question fairly: Is the reward worth the expenditure? If not, it is to be left alone definitely. If, on the contrary, the game be considered worth the candle, why is not a more systematic search made for this reward, with eyes open to the necessary rhythmic rise and fall of one's energies? Before we can make a decision to undertake a systematic search, we must consider the problem: Is this a supreme experience which we seek, or are we merely trifling with the nervous system to produce exalted but trivial moods? If the latter alternative be accepted, and it is accepted by a great number of persons, the desirability of any attempt to rise above the humdrum of day by day existence becomes highly questionable. Yet we see, in one form or another, all over the world, attempt after attempt being made to obtain other joys than the ordinary, other delights than those of sense, other insights than those of discursive thought. Predominantly it is believed that these things are obtainable in the ecstatic trance.

But if we are not to explain the ecstatic trance as a supernatural grace, nor as a disease, nor as an abnormality, nor yet as an accidental heightening of ordinary powers by a kind of hypnosis, what remains? Let us examine a particular

technique for attaining ecstasy in some detail. The first steps of the Yoga enjoin that the aspirant keep scrupulously the moral law. He must avoid injuring anyone, avoid stealing, lying, murder, adultery and slander. He must cultivate attitudes of sympathy and compassion. All these are calculated, as is also the strict poverty, to set him beyond reach of most of the disturbances a man encounters from contact with other persons. The cultivation of desirelessness also operates to free him from preoccupation with things.

Then he is to assume a posture for meditation which has the advantage of giving his body ease, so that it will not intrude itself upon his tranquillity. Next he builds up habits of breathing which promote utter quiescence. His diet is reduced so that the craving for food will not break in upon him. When these preliminaries are mastered, he begins to control his senses, to learn the difficult art of not attending to what may knock upon the gates of the eye and ear. He practises a concentration of mind upon steadily narrowing fields of thought until in the end he reaches that one-pointedness for which all this ordered program was intended. Then, if he is successful, the ecstasy falls upon him.

Apart from all doctrinal considerations, it is apparent that here we have a deliberate process of shutting out the outer world of sense stimulations, a tremendous effort to stop the shifting of thought from point to point, in order to hold it by an act of will upon one point immovably. Concerning

this matter Dr. Ribot says:

"It is a common and settled truism that consciousness exists only through change, but this law has been infringed in the case of a few exceptional individuals, in very rare instances and during very short spaces of time. In ordinary ecstasy consciousness attains to its maximum of constriction (retrecissement) and intensity, but it still preserves its discursive form: it differs only in degree from very strong attention. The greatest mystics alone have attained, by a still stronger effort, to absolute monoidaism. All of them, in all countries, in all times, without knowing of each other's experience, have considered the perfect unity of consciousness, henosis, as the supreme consummation of ecstasy, rarely attained. Consciousness, at this extreme point, cannot long endure. It is placed without its necessary conditions of existence and the nervous elements that are the supports and agents of this prodigious activity cannot long endure the intense strain."¹

If, as Dr. Ribot says, consciousness is able to overpass its customary discursive or oscillating condition and maintain itself for a time in a state of absolute unity, we know something about the nature of consciousness which is not derivable from its ordinary conditions. We may have a strictly scientific curiosity to know more of the nature of this experience of a completely unified consciousness. It adds zest to this curiosity if we remember at this point that all such terms as "mind" and "consciousness" are but labels which human beings have devised to indicate that primary something which eludes the finest analysis and escapes all attempts at definition. In fact,

1. Ribot, The Psychology of Attention, p. 93.

the position which Dr. Ribot takes becomes highly important when we reflect that all the customary definitions of consciousness are built upon the observed fact of its constant shifting, "like a monkey in a tree" as the Buddhists say. If the constant oscillation is not a sine qua non of consciousness, we are then thrown back into a mystification which can be resolved only by the experience of this unitary state by each one for himself. Until then we are everywhere confronted with the uselessness of attempting to comprehend unity by means of diversity, much as we should be if we tried to predict the qualities of a chemical compound by a thorough study of the properties of each constituent element.

However, we do know a little about this unitary state, if we will remember the contradictory and seemingly impossible reports of the mystics. We are not able, as we have already found, to understand them completely, so long as we have not had the experience ourselves. But let us do what we can to get an inkling of their meaning. Mystics who have a conception of one God, say that they become one with him in this state. Those who believe in the Absolute find the Absolute. Those who believe that each individual is in reality the All, a center limited by the external conditions of the world of forms and things, say that in this state the limitations are removed and each comes to a realization of his true nature, which is limitless. All the Hindu systems agree that here one touches sat-chit-ananda, that is, perfect being, perfect consciousness and perfect bliss.

The moderns speak of "seeing into the principles and foundations of things" and of "wonderful peace", and so on. Now, regardless of our various theological persuasions we can see that these persons are trying to tell us that this state, wherein consciousness reaches perfect unity, is a state of bliss, of profound pleasure, a state which is still conscious without the ordinary limitations of consciousness, and a state which carries its own conviction of certitude of being.

This, in the end, is about all we can say of the nature of unified consciousness, if we have not experienced it. But these statements are extraordinary ones; since, if they are true, they indicate that something can be obtained in the ecstatic trance which we look for in vain elsewhere. For where else in our daily life can perfect bliss be found? We are always at liberty to say that this is all self-delusion and unreality. Some such position seems necessary if we are to maintain undisturbed our belief in the worthfulness of ordinary conscious states. If we do not maintain it we are in danger of acknowledging that the mystics have had experiences which are worth much more than are any of ours, an acknowledgement that works havoc among our settled values.

Nevertheless there always remains the disturbing possibility that perhaps consciousness does not need its continued oscillation in order to exist; that perhaps it is able to attain absolute unity; and finally, that perhaps in its attainment we experience, be it for ever so brief an interval of

clock time, the ultimates which are otherwise nothing but vaguely conceived and improbable ideals. We are too apt to forget that for all our wealth of accumulated knowledge, we actually know very little of the nature and significance of what we call consciousness, the root fact underlies all our life from the cradle to the grave, that creates laws and languages, institutions and philosophies, that seeks pleasure and avoids pain, delighting in love, wealth, fame and power. We suspect sometimes that perhaps we have not yet sounded the depths of its possibilities, or explored its manifold varieties. The statement made by William James, with the utter frankness characteristic of the man, seems to strike the right note of humility in view of this universal ignorance. He says:-

"Our normal waking consciousness, rational consciousness as we call it, is but one special type of consciousness, whilst all about it, parted from it by the filmiest of screens, there lie potential forms of consciousness entirely different. We may go through life without suspecting their existence; but apply the requisite stimulus, and at a touch they are there in all their completeness, definite types of mentality which probably somewhere have their field of application and adaptation. No account of the universe in its totality can be final which leaves these other forms of consciousness quite disregarded. How to regard them is the question, for they are so discontinuous with ordinary consciousness. Yet they may determine attitudes though they cannot furnish formulas, and open a region though they fail to give a map. At any rate, they forbid a premature closing of our accounts with reality. Looking back at my own experiences, they all converge towards a kind of insight to which I cannot help ascribing some metaphysical significance. The keynote of it is invariably a reconciliation. It is as if the opposites of the world, whose contradictions and conflict makes all our difficulties and troubles, were melted into unity. Not only do they, as contrasted species, belong to one and the same genus, but one of the species, the nobler and better one, is itself the genus, and so soaks up

and absorbs its opposite into itself. This is a dark saying, I know, when thus expressed in terms of common logic, but I cannot wholly escape from its authority."

If we accept, even as a temporary hypothesis, the proposition that the state of consciousness which may be called indifferently absolute monoideism, kenosis, samadhi, fana, or ecstasy is one which is attended with values not obtainable in other ways, can any ideal of the good life maintain a claim to exclusiveness which either refuses to take it into account at all, or relegates it to a position of negligibility? The difficulty which has hitherto blocked the road to any recognition of the value of ecstasy is the belief that it must be taken over, if at all, with the valuation which those who have experienced it set upon it, and so give it first place, building upon it their religious ideal. Western thinkers are unwilling to do this. Such revaluation is unalterably opposed to the philosophy of the Occident and to the modern temper. In spite of the unrest and dissatisfaction of the age, we are not willing to upset our entire world-view to build another upon a basis so revolutionary. Moreover, it is unnecessary. We are not limited to wholesale acceptance or flat rejection. Faithful to our tradition, let us make it a matter for experiment.

If it be felt that this is unworthy of the modern genius, upon what ground can a deeper significance be attrib-

1. Varieties of Religious Experience, p. 388.

uted to the ecstatic trance, without committing ourselves to past interpretations? Because of our adherence to the conception of organic evolution we should be free from the conceit that man, as he now is, with his present states of consciousness, is the stopping point in the evolutionary process. There is little in a careful reading of evolutionary evidences to justify the belief that in us the cosmos has reached its goal. We are, however, unable to foresee what the next step in the development will be, and may well pause to consider whether or not conscious life, the present result of evolution, may reach out to a new and more lofty condition.

Note: Should we attempt to forecast this new state, would it not be in order to follow present trends, to ask what the race has so far found to be the apex of its incarnate experience? The answer is at hand in the reports of the great mystics -- it is ecstasy. May it not be possible that in the ages ahead of us that the human race will reach permanently the level of existence which heretofore has been found only by "a few exceptional individuals in very rare instances and during very short spaces of time"? This may seem at first sight, not so much shrewd speculation as arrant folly. How indeed can the race continue any kind of life if it is to be impervious to outside stimulation? The Neanderthal man might well have asked how a man could avoid starvation or being eaten by tigers if he spent most of his day in thought. But we have arranged a civilization which liberates many, so that they may pursue abstractions untroubled by hunger or danger. Mathematicians need not catch their dinner on the hoof, nor walk with straining senses through perilous jungles. The analogy cannot be pushed too far, but it is provocative.

Nor are we forced to picture all humanity seated continually in uninterrupted trance. We may, however, contemplate the spectacle of a race which is able to attain oneness with much more ease than can we, one that is familiar with the unified condition of consciousness and knows its implications and arranges communal, terrestrial life in the light of such experiences, without straying too

M. Recejac has shown in his Essay that it is vain to look for an extension of knowledge from the mystic experience; knowledge, that is to say, which is comparable to that which we obtain from the external world by means of sensation. The fact that the ecstatic trance has in the past "confirmed" so many conflicting philosophies, e. g. theism, trinitarianism, pantheism, absolute idealism, pluralism, and so on, has been repeatedly pointed out by modern writers. This fact cannot be insisted upon too soberly or too often. Repeated analysis of the obtainable cases established it beyond question. It is impossible, therefore, for any existing system of theology to claim with any justification that it alone is substantiated by the revelation of the ecstasy. For practically any other system can make the same claim, on the strength of the findings of its own devotees. An impartial judge cannot give a decision in favor of any of these claims. He cannot say that the "object" with which the ecstatic makes "contact" is really this or that ultimate, and that all the other seers who have not so perceived it are mistaken.

One is justified in concluding that the trance may not be considered a revelation in the customary sense of con-

Note concluded: far from the possible. We cannot deny that if "perfect consciousness, perfect being and perfect bliss" were readily available for every child of man, our present notions of what constitutes a good life would appear somewhat inadequate.

tact with any supernal object, but he is not justified in concluding that because of this the trance has no value whatever. He must always come back to the testimony, repeated in so many ways in the accessible data, that herein are to be found joy, peace and certitude. In Pascal's "Memorial"² these three words stand out nakedly. Ellina von Crevelsheim says that she was "bound with chains of love, enveloped in light, and filled with peace and joy"². Ruysbroeck tells of the "communication of life and of beatitude, in which all things are consummated and all things are renewed"³. Suso calls it a "manifestation of the sweetness of eternal life in the sensations of silence and of rest"⁴. And so we might multiply instances wherein language is ransacked for terms such as "rapture", "ravishing", "heavenly delights", "the vision of Beauty", the "beatific vision", "heavenly music", "tears of joy" -- terms which lose their significance, as do all words which convey emotion, when they are too frequently repeated or when they are formally dissected.

There are other indications, too, which the careful student may not neglect, such as in the statement of St. Teresa that "very often he who was before sickly and full of pain comes forth (from ecstasy) healthy and even with new strength"⁵, and in that of Mr. Blood that "this has been my moral sustenance since I have known of it"⁶, and in many more remarks of

1. Underhill, op.cit. p.225. 2. Ibid, p.442. 3. Ibid, p.446.

4. Ibid, p.226. 5. St. Teresa, Vida ch.xx. 6. W. James, op.cit. 391

similar import. We have also the evidence of the active energy displayed by the mystics after the experience, evidence available for anyone who will examine it. These values, peace, joy, certitude, renewal of strength, are just the values which are too often lacking in our troubled age. As Mr. Walter Lippman has said of the modern man, "in the free play of his uninhibited instincts he does not find any natural substitutes for those accumulated convictions which, however badly they did it, nevertheless organized his soul, economized his effort, consoled him, and gave him dignity in his own eyes because he was part of some greater whole".¹

The widening discrepancy between the increasing complexity of our civilization and the capacity of our organisms to bear it, is already a common theme of pessimists. We are living in the midst of a complicated human environment, surrounded by and using machines that only relatively few of us can manage and fewer still repair. Human knowledge has long ago outgrown the capacity of any single man to master. But knowledge constantly grows, machines are multiplied, and complexity increases. Industrialism has met the difficulty partially by shortening the working day and by granting vacations with pay. The burden of civilization is divided and distributed, yet it remains onerous. There is a dearth of just those values which the mystics tell us of over and over again,- joy, peace, strength, and the transmutation of pain

1. W.Lippman, A Preface to Morals, p.19.

in the conviction of "belonging", the profound feeling of being "at home" in the world.

The depth of quality of these values has led persons who have known them in the illumination of the ecstatic trance to attribute them to the supernatural, yet they are values which, like all human values, are of worth in the world here and now. Their renewed strength, the mystics used in our human world. The joy and peace were felt and known by living persons in the same world wherein we all live. The certainty gave point and purpose to personalities who had, willy nilly, to "return" to the world of their fellow-men. Whether or not one believes that these things come as a result of the interweaving of two orders of reality, they are of worth in our natural world and are therefore human values.

But it may be urged that this ecstatic certainty would be a tremendous force for conservatism, for the preservation of institutions and habits of thought which are really obstacles in the way of the winning for the race of those other values which we so desperately need and so eagerly desire. The evidence of history is rather on the other side. The great mystics were but seldom dogmatic theologians and grand inquisitors; indeed their theology was often a matter of concern to the orthodox. But be that as it may, the clear proof which we now have of the conflict of the doctrinal deliverances of the mystics should constitute a perpetual

warning against bigotry and intolerance. The evident fact that one's doctrinal interpretation of the ecstasy is conditioned by his previous training and experience should be an effective bar to dogmatism.

Meanwhile, there are many indications in contemporary writings that the process of dissipating human personality by ignoring the unity of the self and by reducing it to fragmentary impersonal mechanisms, has reached its term. The restoration of the human being to his central importance, the integration of personality into a keenly self-conscious unit is already under way and will develop an increasing momentum. At the forefront of this line of progress there is need for those who can make articulate the deeper significance of consciousness, its nature and further possibilities. Chief among these possibilities is that of the potential unification of consciousness, which has hitherto been actualized under the auspices of theological systems, a monopoly that need not continue. It is here proposed that ecstasy be secularized, at least to the extent of ridding it of past theological interpretations; that it be made the subject of experiment, with an eye to its being perhaps the next stage of organic evolution on the planet.

In summary, the admission of the reality of a state wherein the flow of images and thoughts is stilled and yet consciousness remains, will furnish a way of conceiving what the ecstasies have known, and why they needed to strain

words in their attempts to report their experiences. The further admission that this unified state is accompanied by an intensely pleasurable feeling, will help us to understand how ecstasy has come to be a word to conjure with. Finally, we may with composure leave the verification of these new conceptions to experiment. For by experiment we may be able at some later date to establish definitively the place of the ecstatic trance in the good life. Until then, its place in our ideal is assured, because of the values it offers. It must be included in our ideal as an open possibility, a field to be worked, for results which may transcend our most sanguine expectations.

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